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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present the multiple uses that can be derived from special education student database information and used in the evaluation of special education programs. Within the San Juan (California) Unified School District, many evaluation studies draw directly upon information which is in the computerized record system. This database uses as input the information collected during the referral, assessment and placement process. Some of the evaluation questions which can be answered from such a database include: How many placement and review meetings are held? How many parents and students attend IEP team meetings? What are the goal areas for students in different programs? What achievement gains are made by deaf and hard-of-hearing students? How satisfied are parents of special education students? In summary, special education database systems can provide: an easy way of identifying various groups of students for evaluation studies; various types of information to use in analyzing program effects, depending upon the data selected for input; and current information for administrative use on a regular or as-needed basis. (BW)

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MORE BANG FROM YOUR BYTES:

USING SPECIAL EDUCATION DATA BASE INFORMATION

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More Bang From Your Bytes:

Using Special Education Data Base Information

The purpose of this paper is to present the multiple uses that can be derived from special education student data base information and used in the evaluation of special education programs.

California changed its special education programs in 1974, with the adoption of a "Master Plan for Special Education." Although this plan has much in common with the subsequent P.L. 94-142, one unique provision of California's plan is the requirement that districts plan and implement special education program evaluations.

California legislation has provided special education funding allocations for the support of such "regional" services such as program evaluation and management information systems or student data bases. This funding support for the two services reflects the close relationship which can exist between evaluation and information systems. Even with such regionalization, in practice, the same person is frequently responsible for both functions.

This close relationship between data bases and evaluation is very helpful, as there are many evaluation uses for the types of information which can be maintained in information systems. In this presentation I will discuss some of the ways in which computerized information systems have been used in special education evaluation, using my district as an example.

Computerized Data Bases

Within the San Juan Unified School District, a district of 43,5000 students with a special education population of about 4,300 students, many evaluation studies draw directly upon information which is in the computerized record system. This record system is housed in a Univac mainframe computer on a separate disk file reserved for the special education data base. This system is interactive, with two remote terminals for data input and retrieval.

This data base uses as input the information collected during the referral, assessment and placement process. The information from certain of the forms, including the IEP, is entered into the special education data file. This file contains 365 separate elements of information ranging from the conditions which led to the referral, through the assessment areas, consent date, to the IEP meeting and the subsequent areas for objectives, and the programs and services which the student would receive. A number of management and teacher reports are available which present information on individual students, classes, or program groups. In addition to mass-produced reports, questions can be asked directly about any of the file elements from remote terminals.

Many different data base systems are in place throughout California for special education, from mainframe systems to microcomputer systems, from those which contain only a limited number of identification elements to those which incorporate banks of objectives for use in preparing student Individualized Education Programs, dates for due process checks, and records of health and results of testing. These systems, whether simple or complicated, all share one characteristic--they contain information which can be helpful for evaluation.

Special Education Program Evaluation

Special education is complex and unique. It is not a single "special education program", but rather a series of separate programs, each serving students with unique needs and problems. These programs are distinguishable by one or more

of the following: type of student handicap, administrative structure, ages of students, variety of services being provided, and/or individual student goals. Furthermore, teachers and parents of these students form distinct populations--in some ways similar, and in other ways very different. Such program variety requires a corresponding variety in the approach to program evaluation.

Even the simplest computer system can assist the special education evaluator by providing listings of students who meet specified criteria (age, handicap, school, etc.) for use in evaluation studies. More extensive computer systems can be much more useful in program evaluation. The examples in this presentation are from the San Juan special education evaluation and MIS systems.

Each year the special education evaluation studies are planned jointly by the evaluator and the program management staff. These studies fall into two groups--(1) continuing studies which extend for a number of years and allow comparisons to be drawn about longitudinal changes, and (2) special studies which address particular questions of current interest.

Continuing Evaluation Studies

The types of evaluation questions which are asked in the continuing studies make extensive use of the information in the computerized data base. They include questions which, at first glance, may seem simply enumerative. Note, however, that these questions are continued for more than one year, and it is the year-to-year analysis that produces the evaluation information. Examples of continuing study questions requiring computer data base information are given in Table 1.

Table 1

1982-83 Continuing Evaluation Studies Excerpted from the
San Juan Unified School District Special Education Evaluation Design

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED	DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
1. How many placement and review meetings are held?	Get MIS counts of IEP team meetings for 1982-83 by purpose, and compare with last two years.
2. How many students are referred and placed or not placed? Of those placed, what are their settings?	Get MIS counts of referrals and eligibility/placement, and compare with last two years.
3. How many parents/students attend IEP team meetings?	Get MIS counts of parent/student participation in 1982-83 meetings and compare with last two years.
4. What other services are given to special education students?	Get MIS counts of multiple services.
5. What are the goal areas for students in different programs?	Get MIS counts of goals by program and service.
6. What are the monthly changes in enrollment, service proportions and in staffing ratios?	Prepare MIS count reports each month and combine into an historical record.
7. What achievement gains are made by deaf and hard-of-hearing students?	Compare Stanford Achievement Test scores for last three years.
8. What achievement is noted over several years for Special Day Class and Resource students?	Study achievement on WRAT and ITBS over a two to four year period.
9. How satisfied are parents of special education students? (Group to be determined.)	Select sample of parents to match selection criteria. Use MIS to prepare list and mailing labels.

Five of the questions given in Table 1 are discussed below as examples of how the information found in each study is used in the special education program.

Question 1--How many placement and review meetings are held?

Staffing various types of meetings is a critical function. Although at first it was though that about one-third of all IEP meetings would be the "three-year review" type, it was apparent from this study that, due to student attrition, only about one-fifth of the students would require the complete re-assessment and multi-staff involvement required for the three-year review.

Question 3--How many parents and students attend IEP team meetings?

While parent participation has been an assumed part of the IEP process, students have not been included to the extent thought desirable. Information on student participation in the IEP meeting was readily available through the special education student data base, and comparisons over several years indicated an increasing number of students taking part in the IEP meetings. In 1981-82, students attended 20 percent of all team meetings.

Question 5--What are the goal areas for students in different programs?

The goal areas for students receiving different services vary by age as well as by implied handicap. Counts of the major goals for various handicapping conditions indicated the priorities placed on instructional areas. This information was used for curriculum development and for acquiring instructional materials. The information was also used to identify areas to include in questionnaires for teachers and to explore in other evaluation studies.

Question 7--What achievement gains are made by deaf and hard-of-hearing students?

Student achievement test information is held in the data base. This information allows comparisons over time on the same students. Information on the deaf and hard-of-hearing student population was studied for three years to determine both overall progress and possible differences from year to year and between the deaf and the hard-of-hearing students. It was found that, while some students had uneven year-to-year achievement, the pattern over the three years indicated growth at about twice that reported as "average" in the Gallaudet norming study.

Question 9--How satisfied are parents of special education students?

From year to year different parent groups are identified to receive the parent survey. For example, a survey one year was directed to parents whose children

had received special education services for five or more years. The parents were identified by listing only those students who had entered special education in 1977 or earlier. Thus the information system enabled the survey to be sent to the proper group of parents. These parents reported greater satisfaction with programs and more benefits from the IEP meetings than did parents whose children had been served less than one year.

Special Evaluation Studies

The second type of evaluation studies, special studies, also makes use of information from the management information system. Sometimes this information is used for selecting the appropriate student population, and other times the actual information needed is contained in the system. Two examples of such special studies are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Examples of Special Studies Excerpted from the San Juan School District Special Education Evaluation Design for 1982-83.

QUESTION TO BE ANSWERED	DATA ANALYSIS
1. How well are the revised Specific Learning Disability criteria applied and what effects are noted in enrollment/ placement compared with 1981-82?	IEP study of Specific Learning Disability placements. Analysis of MIS enrollments and placements for 1981-82 and 1982-83.
2. How long do Resource students receive service before returning full time to regular classes? At what grade levels are most students identified and what is the yearly turnover within the Resource Specialist Program?	MIS study of student placements made from 1980 through 1983. Analysis in terms of year of placement, grade level when identified, and length of time service is given.

To further illustrate the way in which the computer data base assists in evaluation activities, the first special study will be discussed. Given nearly 2,000 new placements in special education each year in the San Juan District, it is difficult to select a group of new students with a specific handicap and program placement for further study without a computer data base. With computer information available about the date of entry to special education, the specific handicap classification and the type of program placement, it is simple to list the names of students for further study. And when the IEP record files for

these students are maintained at different office locations, as they are in large districts, lists can be produced separately for each office using the appropriate identifier.

In our study we were able to use the computer to prepare lists of new students who had been identified as having specific learning disabilities and placed in special education classes or in the resource specialist program. Clerks went to the proper offices to collect the additional information needed for the students in the study. (Even extensive data bases do not attempt to maintain all the possible information on each special education student!)

As a result of gathering this information, we found that the criteria were being applied appropriately, and that proper documentation procedures were being followed in preparing the student IEPs. We also were able to provide some analytic information related to tests used in identification, the amount of discrepancy found between ability and achievement in the different the areas of academic difficulty, and the types of psychological processing disorders found.

While these examples do not exhaust the possibilities for using special education data base information in evaluation of both instructional and administrative operations, they provide an overview of how information is used in evaluating the special education program in the San Juan School District.

Other Computer Applications

Elsewhere in California, special education data bases are being used for an increasing number of administrative applications. A few areas are using data base information to preprint the first part of a student's Individualized Education Program. And a small number are attempting to to produce a complete "proposed" IEP, with the final IEP produced following the team meeting. As these computer applications increase, more information will be available for program evaluation purposes.

Summary

In summary, special education data base systems provide an easy way of identifying the various groups of students for evaluation studies. They can provide various types of information to use in analyzing program effects, depending upon the data selected for input. They also provide current information for administrative use on a regular or as-needed basis. The relative ease of getting up-to-date information enables administrators to use evaluation information for program changes much sooner than would be possible without such a system.

It is now up to program evaluators to make use of special education computer data base information to produce "more bang for their bytes."